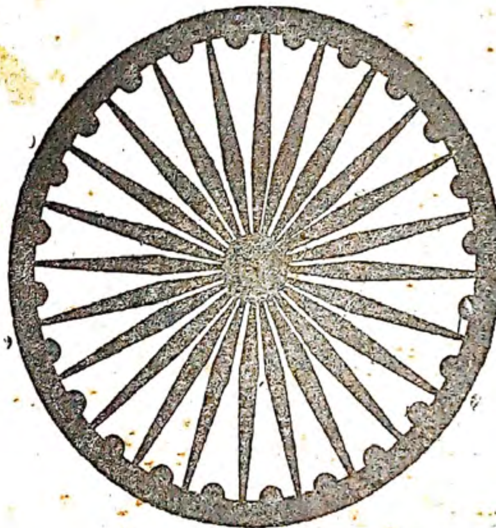
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SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE COPPER COINS OF RĀMAGUPTA

BY

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I.

Recently Prof. K. D. Bajpai has published a paper on some copper coins of Rāmagupta, gathered from the Vidiśā district of Madhya Pradeśa[1]. Earlier some copper coins of Rāmagupta bearing the legend, *Rāmaguta,* or *Maguta* or *(Rā)magupta* on one side and a lion-figure on the other were published by P. L. Gupta[2], H. V. Trivedi[3] and K. D. Bajpai[4]. These are all copper coins discovered, with one exception, from the same area and make an interesting study for, on the basis of these coins it has been zealously sought to prove the historicity of Rāmagupta, the so-called Gupta King whom some scholars have consistently endeavoured to project, as the immediate successon of Samudragupta, on the convas of Gupta history. Earlier efforts having failed, I believe, Prof. Bajpai's is the latest in the field and deserves some consideration.

A Study of all the copper coins published so far by scholars, indeed, makes the confusion worse confounded. The effort to prove Rāmagupta as a Gupta king on the basis of these doubtful issues appears to have clouded the vision of the champions of this theory who are out to establish their view-point by any means, and in this unseemly attempt the worst casualty has been the numismatic convention as well as some of the known facts of the Gupta history. It is true that all of them, at some stage or other, have claimed that they are not "dogmatic" about their views but

1. *JNSI.* XXIII, 1961, pp. 340 ff.
2. *Ibid.* XII (pt. ii), pp. 103-6, pl. IX, 1-6.
3. *Ibid.* XIII (pt. ii), pp. 128-30, pl. VIII, 1-8.
4. *Ibid.* XVIII (pt. i), pp. 108-09, pl. VIII. 1.

their line of argument leaves no doubt that in these discussions it is their "dogma" that plays a greater part than an unbiased approach to the problem itself.

II

In an earlier paper[1] I have thoroughly dealt with all the aspects of this problem and examined all the available sources—literary, epigraphic and numismatic—bearing on the Gupta history. Except a slender piece of literary evidence, which is suspicious and late, we have no evidences worth the name to suggest that Rāmagupta really succeeded Samudragupta after his death. I have also shown that these later historical dramas can not be relied upon as trustworthy sources of history, for they are more a piece of drama than a fact of sober history. The tradition with regard to this episode in later literary works is often contradictory, discrepant and hardly conclusive, and is very much unsuited to form the basis of such historical conclusions[2].

The indirect and vague reference to this episode, evidently borrowed from literary traditions, in some of the later epigraphic records, is too meagre, confusing and referatory to arouse any sense of belief in the theory so based. Further, it loses the force, if any, as it is unsupported by contemporary Gupta records on other epigraphic evidences of the period[3].

III

Other sources having failed, numismatic evidence is always the last to rely upon. But, here too, we only meet with disappointment. No coins of Rāmagupta were discovered in the Bayana hoard which contained the largest number of Gupta gold coins of all the early monarchs including Skandagupta. It is inexplicable why we should have so far found no gold coins of Rāmagupta if at all he was a historical personage, as the exponents of this theory would have us believe.

1. Upendra Thakur, "Historicity of Rāmagupta" in *Proc. IHC.* 1958, pp. 79-88.
2. For details see *Ibid.* pp. 80-82.
3. *Ibid.* pp. 82-83.

But, the recent discovery of six copper coins of one Rāmagupta at Besnagar (Bhilsā) by P. L. Gupta[1]; nine copper coins from the same place by H. V. Trivedi[2]; a new copper coin found by K. D. Bajpai in Talbehat, a small town in the Jhansi district of Uttara Pradeśa[3] and finally twelve copper coins, including a new type *i.e.*, the Garuḍa type larger in number than the first one *i.e.* the Lion type, gathered by K. D. Bajpai from Eraṇ, a place about 45 miles from Vidiśā (a district town) in Madhya Pradeśa[4], has tremendously encouraged the exponents of this theory to boldly assert that these coins support the historicity of the literary episode which places Rāmagupta, immediately after Samudragupta, as a Gupta monarch. And, it is to this series of discussions that Bajpai has recently contributed one more, claiming that this Rāmagupta was none other than the elder brother of Candragupta II and that the episode (as contained in the literary works) took place in Vidiśā or Eraṇ[5]:

These discussions, for discussion sake, are no doubt quite interesting, but at the same time they also pose certain searching queries which must be satisfactorily answered before we hasten to pronounce a final judgement. The views of the compilers of the so-called Rāmagupta-coins may be summarised as follows :

(i) The coins published "belong undoubtedly to the same Rāmagupta who was the brother of Candragupta II of the Gupta dynasty" as the coins in question are "similar in fabric, type and metrology to the coins of Candragupta II which were issued by him in Mālavā." Further, they also bear the "legend in Gupta script and the name of the issuer is clearly Rāmagupta" (P. L. Gupta)[6].

1. P. L. Gupta, "The Coins of Rāmgupta" in *JNSI.* XII, pp. 103-06. pl. IX, 1-6.
2. H. V. Trivedi, "Some more copper coins of Rāmagupta (?)" in *JNSI.* XIII, pp. 128-30, pl. VIII, 1-9.
3. *JNSI.* XVIII, pp. 108-9, pl. VIII, fig. 1.
4. *Ibid.* XXIII (Golden J. Vol.), pp. 340-44, pl. X.
5. *Ibid.* pp. 343-44.
6. *Ibid.* XII, p. 106.

(ii) "The present pieces appear to have been struck by a ruler, Rāmagupta by name. Whether this Rāmagupta was a local prince or the Imperial Gupta ruler can only be decided after some more conclusive evidence is available"...... "In view of this there appears to be nothing improbable in considering Rāmagupta having struck these coins on the local pattern in the region around Eraṇ which was included in the Gupta dominions as early as in the reign of Samudragupta and from where they may have travelled to Bhilsā which is only about forty miles from it." (H. V. Trivedi)[1]. The author, however, hastens to add that he is not "dogmatic" in holding this view.

(iii) It seems difficult to associate the copper coin of Rāmagupta found in the Jhansi district of Uttara Pradeśa, "with the copper coins of the Gupta rulers. It appears more plausible that the coin bearing the legend 'Rāmagupta' was issued by some local king of eastern Malwa"[2] (K. D. Bajpai).

(iv) The author, however, changed his view based on the study of the solitary coin from Jhansi when he gathered some more copper coins of the king from Erāṇ. In his latest he asserts: "now looking to a large number of coins of this ruler (and particularly of the Garuḍa type) from Vidiśā and Erāṇ, it appears that this Rāmagupta was none other than the elder brother of Candragupta II"[3] (K. D. Bajpai). Thus, he fully supports the views of P. L. Gupta, and H. V. Trivedi who lent their strong support to the theory bearing on the historicity of Rāmagupta, propounded by the late Dr. A. S. Altekar.

IV.

The most interesting point about these coins is that they are all (with one exception) from the same place *i.e.*, Vidiśā and almost belong to the same type. They follow the same pattern, style and metal, with a slight difference in type or symbol: for

1. *Ibid.* XIII, pp. 129-30.
2. *Ibid.* XVIII, p. 109.
3. *Ibid.* XXIII, p. 343.

instance, we have Garuḍa on some of the coins gathered by K.D. Bajpai from Erāṇ. The line of argument adopted by the scholars being the same, the conclusions arrived at, are inevitably the same. In fact, it is the monotonous repetition of the same tale, told and re-told by scholars with nothing fresh or innovating to add.

It has been argued that on all these coins: (i) the legend is clearly in Gupta script and as "we know of no other Rāmagupta the coins should be attributed to him"; (ii) the coins show a marked resemblance to the copper coins of Candragupta II meant for circulation in Malwa, though in fabric and weight the so-called Rāmagupta coins strikingly resemble the Mālava coins with lion on the obverse and a legend on the reverse, the only difference being that the posture of the lion on the coins of the former is a bit different from that on the obverse of the latter; (iii) on the reverse of the Mālava coins there is no such symbol as crescent and the legend is within a rectangular incuse, not closed in a circle as in the case of the Rāmagupta coins. In other words, these coins have been shown to be similar in fabric, type and metrology, to the coins of Candragupta II, issued by him in Malwa bearing the name of the issuer, *Rāmagupta* in Gupta script. H.V. Trivedi's discussion of some more copper coins of Rāmagupta does not show any further improvement; on the otherhand it seems, as if it were meant to emphatically support Gupta's contention and leaves the point at that. Bajpai goes a step further and boldly asserts that the coins bearing the name 'Rāmagupta' are "not the issues of any local officer of the Imperial Guptas, nor any feudatory king, Rāmagupta": they were definitely issued by "Rāmagupta, the elder brother of Candragupta II Vikramāditya", and the scene of this unfortunate Rāmagupta-Śaka-episode was Vidiśā or Erāṇ. Thus, unlike others, he is not argumentative, but dogmatic and assertive.

Dr. Altekar strongly supports these views as they very well go in support of his theory on the historicity of Rāmagupta[1].

1. *Ibid.* XII. p. 105-06; XIII, p. 130; *Bayana Hoard*, pp. xxiv-v.

Dr. J. N. Banerjea,[1] A. K. Narain[2] and others[3] believe that Rāmagupta of these coins may have been a local ruler of Malwa.

A study of these copper coins leaves no doubt that they belong to two different fabrics, though H. V. Trivedi does not subscribe to this view and the arguments advanced by him, are quite vague and unconvincing. They appear to have been issued by two different rulers which A. K. Narain has so aptly pointed out in his note on P. L. Gupta's coins. Some of the coins have the legend *Rāma*, while others have *maga, magaja* (*magata*), *magupa, magu* etc. We have similar odd and peculiar names on some of the Mālava coins which have been differently interpreted by different scholars. The Prākṛit form of the name of Rāmagupta is there, but this does not necessarily show that it refers to Rāmagupta, the Gupta king, and not to some other king or chief whom we do not know from other sources. Moreover, on all the coins of the Gupta kings we have always the names in Sanskrit form : if so, how are we going to explain this sudden departure from the established convention set forth by the Guptas? Local consideration can not be said to have cropped up, as neither on the copper coins of Candragupta II, nor on those of Kumāragupta I such anamolies are to be found. This is quite unusual in the case of the Guptas, but may convincingly be interpreted in the context of the Mālava coinage.

V.

Our present knowledge of the Gupta copper currency shows that it was first introduced by Candragupta II. But, if it was started by Rāmagupta, how is it that it exercised no influence, whatever, on the coins stated by his successor ? It is not only surprising but contrary to normal numismatic convention that as many as nine types of copper currency issued by Candragupta are basically different from the ones circulated by his predecessor.

1. *JBRS*, XLI., p. 213.
2. *JNSI*, XII, pp. 107-10.
3. *The classical Age*, pp. 17-18 ; *NHIP*, Chap. VII, Sec. I ; Thakur, *op. cit.*, pp. 79-88 etc.

The lion-motif found on the obverse of the coins of Rāmagupta is conspicuous by its absence even on the reverse side of the coins of Candragupta II, although lion seems to have been a popular motif with him as his lion-slayer type and its variants show.[1] Another peculiarity to take note of in this connection is that either on the gold coins of Samudragupta or those of Candragupta II, the lion has been portrayed as being slain by the monarch on the obverse showing that he possessed much greater prowess and strength than the animal which usually symbolises unrivalled strength and energy in Indian tradition. It is incomprehensive, how could then the great son and successor of Samudragupta allow his portrait to be substituted by that of a lion which has been given inferior status in the Gupta numismatic art ? Gupta's argument that since on a particular seal of Dhruvasvāminī from Vaiśālī, the lion appears in the same pose as it is on these coins, it should be ascribed to Rāmagupta, does not carry conviction. On the other hand, it is more akin to the Mālava coinage having the lion device. The posture of the lion is immaterial and does not necessarily go against numismatic convention, for we have often such instances of variations and modifications in the field of numismatic innovations.

The most important point in this connection is the absence of the bust or figure of the monarch on the obverse. The coins of the Guptas and those of other dynasties either in gold, silver or copper, bear invariably the figure of the monarch with his prerogatives, as far as permitted by the little space, but here again the so called copper coins of Rāmagupta offer a surprising departure from the recognised convention. We know that the first sign of assertion of independent authority on the part of a chief or king was the issuing of coinage in his own name along with his figure or bust thereon. The absence of these features is to be noticed on the tribal republican coinage only, but never on the coinage of the monarchical states whose heads 'were too sensitive to their privileged power and status to allow such

1. A. K. Narain, *JNSI*, XII, p. 109, fn. 2.

deviations to occur on the most potent medium of their exercise of authority. Surprisingly, the reverse device of these coins misses the characteristic features of Candragupta's copper, silver or gold coinage. This undoubtedly shows that these were local issues of some petty chief, divested of all such privileges, owing allegiance to some imperial command.

The so called crescent symbol is not the sure proof of these coins being the genuine issues of Rāmagupta, the Gupta king. This crescent is also found on some of the Nāga coins, showing that it was not the exclusive monopoly of the Guptas. It may be suggested that the local ruler might have borrowed this device either from the Nāga coinage or from the Gupta coinage which by the time of Samudragupta had reached the height of artistic brilliance. Such influences are common in the field of numismatic art and the early Gupta coinage itself bears unmistakble influences of its Kuṣāṇa prototypes. This is a minor point and need not be unnecessarily stressed too far, ignoring other important aspects.

Palaeography, too, does not bear out that these are the issues of one period. Some of these coins are definitely of a slightly earlier age. We do not come across such variations in lettering on scores of copper coins of Candragupta II, as we do in the case of the comparatively much fewer coins of Rāmagupta. Every coin, it seems, presents its own form, and this is all the more surprising.[1]

The appearance of Garuḍa, known to be a characteristic symbol of the Gupta dynasty, on some of the recently discovered coins of this series from Vidiśā or Eraṇ, is regarded as a positive evidence of the coins being the issues of Rāmagupta, the elder brother of Candragupta II.[2] But never was Garuḍa so prominently figured on the obverse side of the coins of the Guptas, as do we find in this particular series, nor did it ever substitute the figure of the monarch himself. This is a very important point, and can not, as such, be explained away in a trivial manner. We should

1. A. K. Narain, *op. sit.* pp. 109-10.
2. *Ibid*. XXIII, p. 343.

also remember that this Garuḍa symbol was as flexible as the crescent and did not constitute the monopoly of one dynasty only. The devotees of Lord Viṣṇu held Garuḍa in high esteem and the Vaiṣṇavas all over the country had some special fascination for this divine bird.

Thus, in point of fabric, type, form and palaeography the coins of Rāmagupta are very much similar to the Nāga and local Mālava coins and equally different from those issued by Candragupta II. It is true, "local traditions have played considerable rôle in Indian history, even in the field of numismatics,"[1] but I fail to understand why Rāmagupta should have deliberately avoided to get his bust engraved on his coinage unlike his predecessors. This explains, if any thing, his clear subordinate position which did not allow him to enjoy that cherished privilege.

VI.

K. D. Bajpai appears to have been in two minds about the interpretation of the coin found at Talbehat in Jhansi district of U. P. It was then "surmised" by him that the said coin, along with similar others published by Gupta and Trivedi, might have been issued by some local ruler of eastern Malwa, but now "looking to a larger number of coins of this ruler (and particularly of the Garuḍa type) from Vidiśā, Eraṇ", he asserts that this Rāmagupta was none other than the one known from literary sources. I wonder how could a few coins of the Garuḍa type change the dubious character of the entire series of coinage which is sometimes claimed to be Nāga, sometimes Mālava and often Gupta ? I do not think that there is any valid ground for Bajpai to change his previous stand as the lion type and the Garuḍa type coins of the series do not throw any refreshing light on this problem and leave it exactly where it was before. Mereover, the copper coins found by Gupta and Trivedi were all from Bhilsā whereas the find-place of the solitary coin from Talbehat is about 116 miles N. N. E. from Bhilsā and the latest is from Vidiśā and

1. *Ibid.* p. 342.

Erāṇ. The anamolies in distance are quite obvious and go against the local origin of the coinage, said to have been meant for circulation in a particular area, but in his zeal to prove it to be the issues of Rāmagupta, Bajpai has not cared to explain it.

The wonderful romance of the travel of these coins from Erāṇ to Bhilsā[1] (as suggested by Trivedi) and then to Talbehat seems mysterious and the suggestion of Bajpai that Vidīśā or Erāṇ formed the venue of the Śaka-Rāmagupta-episode[2] is equally inexplicable. Gupta coins (at least copper coins) are not known to have ever been found in or near Bhilsā so far, and it is all the more doubtful if the regions round Bhilsā had at all come under the sphere of the Guptas before Candragupta II.[3] "Samudragupta had already occupied the territory up to Erāṇ, within forty miles of Besnagar"[4] is no proof that the newly discovered copper coins are those of Rāmagupta of the Imperial Gupta line. It is a hypothesis, pure and simple, which sounds utterly fallacious and unconvincing in the logic of history. It is indeed all the more strange to find that Samudragupta, Candragupta II and their successors, in spite of their numerous types or gold currency did not care to issue such currency in that area, and it fell to the lot of Rāmagupta alone, to take initiative in the matter. Moreover, Malwa along with the tribal states of the Punjab, western India and Central Provinces, was not completely vanquished and annexed to the Gupta empire by Samudragupta for, they are said to have gratified his imperious command (*pracaṇḍa śāsana*) "by giving all kinds of taxes, obeying orders and coming to perform obeisance." This statement in the Allahabad pillar inscription unmistakably shows that it was not directly administered by the Guptas during the time of Samudragupta, it was ruled by a local ruler who paid tribute and homage to the crown. The argument that Rāmagupta of these coins may have been a local ruler of Malwa is, therefore,

1. *Ibid* XIII, p. 130.
2. *Ibid*, XXIII, p. 344.
3. A. K. Narain, *op. cit.* p. 110.
4. A. S. Altekar, *Bayana Hoard* p. XXV.

much nearer the truth and more convincing than the one advanced by Dr. A. S. Altekar and others.[1]

From epigraphic records we learn that Candragupta II was the first ruler of this dynasty who launched military conquest in that direction, *i. e.*, the regions round Bhilsā, at Udayagiri.[2] In spite of the Erāṇ stone pillar inscription of Samudragupta[3] it is doubtful if he ever held the area round Bhilsā under his direct control "so as to enable him or his immediate successor to issue a new coinage suitable for that region".[4] The literary evidences show that Rāmagupta fought against the Śakas, but whether it was in Malwa or in the North-west cannot be definitely ascertained. Even if it is admitted that he fought them near Bhilsā, the fact remains that he was utterly defeated and humiliated. How then, of all the places, his coins could be found at Bhilsā, the scene of his rout and disgrace ? Numismatic evidence clearly suggests that only Candragupta II "can be credited to have advanced in and conquered this area, and just as he started silver coins after annihilating the Western Kṣatrapas, he also took the fancy to issue a copper series, starting with the Vase type, probably borrowed from the Mālava coinage"[5]

It is thus apparent that the so-called Rāmagupta was the only unfortunate Gupta king who had issued no coins, no inscriptions to make any notable event of his reign. But we are asked to believe that in spite of the paucity of archaeological evidence, a few copper coins, alleged to have been issued by him, are sufficient to lend him the dignity and halo of the glorious Imperial Guptas and rank him with them as such—a suggestion which seems utterly absurd in this context.

1. For other details see : Thakur, "Historicity of Rāmagupta" *Proc. IHC*, 1958, pp. 79-88.
2. Cf. his Udayagiri Cave Inscriptions of A. D. 401 : "......कृत्स्न-पृथ्वी-जयार्थेन राज्ञैवेह सहागतः......" (Sircar, *Select Inscriptions*, p. 272).
3. *Ibid.* pp. 260-62.
4. A. K. Narain, *op. cit.* p. 110, fn. 2.
5. *Ibid.* p. 110, fn. 2.